

My dentist has told me I need a root filling – what does this mean?

Root fillings are usually done when the nerve of the tooth is dying or has died.

The living part of the tooth – the nerve and blood vessels or 'pulp' - is contained deep inside a tooth. If bacteria get into the pulp through a cavity, a fracture or leakage under a filling or crown the nerve becomes inflamed. This leads to pain, which can be acute, and eventually to the death of the pulp followed by an abscess.

Apart from taking the tooth out, which has many obvious disadvantages, the only way to treat this is a **root treatment**.

How would I know that a tooth needs root filling?

- The obvious answer is pain, which may be acute (severe) or chronic (long-term 'odd twinge'). Pain with hot food and drink is usually a clear sign that a tooth needs a root filling. Other signs and symptoms might include spontaneous pain, throbbing pain which can wake you at night, swelling of the gum and/or face or tenderness to biting pressure.

How do you know which tooth needs root filling?

- This can be very difficult sometimes as the pain does not always 'localise' very well. We will typically test the tooth with a hot and cold stimuli, we may carry out a vitality test with a sophisticated electronic tester, we may tap the teeth to differentiate between them and we will usually take an x-ray to help us make a diagnosis.
- Sometimes it proves very difficult to be certain which tooth is the source of pain and we may wait for a while for further signs or we may 'investigate' a suspect tooth.

If it is caused by bacteria won't antibiotics cure the problem?

- In short, no. Antibiotics are sometimes used to limit the spread of an infection but the only treatment that will work in the longer term is to remove the reservoir of bacteria causing it – we are back to extraction or root filling.

How is a Root Filling done?

- After making your tooth numb the tooth is carefully isolated with a special elastic barrier before making an 'access cavity' into the nerve space. The old nerve tissue is removed and the tiny channels, or root canals, in the root are cleaned out and disinfected to kill any bacteria. They are then shaped and the space filled up by an inert material, which prevents further infection.

Is this done in one appointment?

- Sometimes root fillings are completed in one appointment but on many occasions a second or even third appointment is required.

I've been told I have an abscess – what is that exactly?

- When bacteria get into the root canals they multiply and produce toxins. These toxins go through the end of the root and into the surrounding bone causing either an acute abscess which is painful – the typical swollen face – or a chronic abscess - usually causing less pain or even none at all).
- Chronic abscesses can be present for years with no symptoms while the body's immune system tries to contain the damage – a time bomb waiting to turn into an acute problem.
- Sometimes there will be a swelling on the gum which discharges – this is a little channel called a 'sinus' running from the abscess to drain the pus.



Do root fillings always work and how long do they last?

- This is very difficult to be precise about. The shape of root canals, particularly in back teeth, is very variable. They can sometimes be difficult to find, let alone fill. This complexity makes it impossible to guarantee that root fillings will be successful and lasting.
- Knowledge, careful technique, special equipment and magnification all increase the chances of success as does the placement of a sound filling, or more often crown, over the top of the root filled root to strengthen and seal it.

Do all your dentists place root fillings?

- All of our clinicians can and do place very effective root fillings.

Can root fillings be replaced?

- If a root filling doesn't work first time or if it fails many years after first placement it is often possible to re-root treat the tooth. This is often more time consuming and difficult than the first but can be very successful.

What is an Endodontist?

- An endodontist has specialist qualifications in the provision of root fillings and we sometimes refer clients to them in order to benefit from their expertise in saving teeth with difficult root canal problems.

